

LEAVING KATHMANDU

Later that afternoon at the airport, we parted. The release of her not coming with me was the chameleon of relief and self-reproach, for we both knew how little of our true selves had been given to this surreal play which we had called “togetherness” for the past five months. How untruthful it now seemed, this pickpocket love, for in parting we had discovered its very paradox – wanting something permanent but not lasting too long. As weak afternoon sunlight filtered through the dim departure hall and caught the prismatic dust high above the clamour, our mood lightened. Her thin dry lips parted with a smile and I responded in kind – a brave show for the leaving. Unsure how to act out this final scene, we flailed around like puppets, as if suspended by strings from jangled emotions, held at the finger tips and hooked in the back, seeking a way to draw down the veil on our tired plot. From under the cover of whispered tendernesses, our final words became pledges and promises – the deceits and lies of departure. But at the last, all she gave was just a hurried pale kiss on the cheek, like a half-greeting for a camphoric old uncle, and a travesty of an embrace – the woman in my arms but not within reach.

Once gone, even after the earlier turmoil and uncertainty of the day, the numbness of separation, of aloneness, set in like a fog coming in from the sea on an English winter’s afternoon – a strange feeling, novel and unsettling, and heightened by the fatigue born of the polluted heat and haze and humidity of that long Kathmandu summer. Never before had I feared being separated from a woman, such was the commitment of previous relationships. It was only then, as I thought of her with a dull

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ache, that some sort of deferred affection resurfaced, and at once I saw the face of a drowning man who had missed the chance of a proffered life vest. The sting of regret had been there in our final touching.

There must have been a trace of her perfume on my shirt or maybe my skin, for now reclined in my window seat five kilometers above the earth and nursing a large gin and tonic, whenever I turned my head she came to me in the faintest scent. I was taken back to the morning when we had gone to her room. I for one, and surely she colluded, secretly hoped for a last chance at some sort of intimacy beyond the sober monotone which our recent lives had become. Some months before, with the first few blossoms of spring, it was as if a chill wind had touched her and frozen all hope of finding the key to unlock each other's mystery in this the city of Shangri-la. She became pre-occupied, as if deep down she was listening to faraway music – it gave her such reserve, such distraction, that she was prevented from really giving herself to love. As if the ghost of rigor mortis was hovering over our feelings, once again that morning we stumbled only upon sex. The plain whitewashed walls, the single bed with its concave hessian mattress and worn yak-wool cover – the cockroach appeal of the place – seemed to make us more needy but, alas, more insensitive to each other. I realized now, in the heady flood of Beefeater reflection, that the physical posturing of the morning had only confirmed our separateness. She must have felt it too, for there were tears in her voice as she left the bed. “We didn't have much luck in our loving” she had said. Lost in her perfume again,

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remembering the morning felt like honey smeared on a razor's edge, like returning to the chaos of a crime scene – a mixture of excitement and disgust, the polarity confusing.

And outside my steel cocoon, the snow covered peaks of the Himalayas, bathed in the carmine orange radiance of an autumn sunset, drifted past the plane's wing tip, like a flake of the life I had just forsaken, split somewhere between paradise and a green lime on ice.